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Katie Mitchell: Feminist Director as Pedagogue

Lisa Peck

Abstract: *An Actor Prepares* relates the reciprocal dialogue between teacher-director and actor to offer a pedagogical enquiry that moves beyond methodology to focus on the learning exchange. In the first decades of the twentieth century teacher-directors, predominantly male, were responsible for developing theatrical pedagogies. In the twenty-first century it is rare to focus on the director as pedagogue or attend to the complex learning exchange between director and actor. Furthermore, curriculums continue to be dominated by predominantly male lineages. Yet a focus on pedagogical approaches allows us to look behind methodologies, what an actor does, to consider *how* an actor learns. What might a gendered consideration of rehearsal practices reveal about the particular features of acting pedagogy? How do feminist interventions reconsider aspects of Stanislavski's approach? I turn to the developed pedagogy of Katie Mitchell to examine her work as a form of *écriture féminine* which creates a post-Stanislavski schooling for actors. Applying a methodology for observing pedagogic practice in the rehearsal room that has been developed over four years of research I consider her approach, drawing upon two extended interviews, observations across four rehearsal processes and interviews with the actors involved. I reflect on her process through a gendered lens as an evolved form of method of physical action, which I re-orientate as a method of feminist action. The particular features of this pedagogy map Mitchell's contribution to developing twenty-first century actor training from a feminist position.

Key words: Katie Mitchell, pedagogy, gender, method of feminist action.

Lisa Peck is a Teaching Fellow in Theatre Practice at the University of Sussex and Visiting Tutor at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama where she trained in actor training and coaching. Her experience as a teacher educator underpins her practice which foregrounds pedagogical enquiry and she has been an education consultant for the National Theatre and currently for Digital Theatre Plus. Her research examines the intersections between social science and the humanities with a particular interest in feminist pedagogy and theatre-making practices. Her PhD thesis mapped a female genealogy of actor training in the UK. Lisa is co-artistic director of RAPT, a theatre company which brings together researchers, artists and community participants to make multimedia site responsive work.

*I've decided. I will keep my notes in the form of a diary.*¹

Both the dialogic exchange between teacher and student in *An Actor Prepares* and its form as a reflective journal reveal a subjective experience of acting pedagogy.² However, a close examination of *how* an actor learns through the direct interactions between actor and teacher/director is rarely the mode for objective pedagogic enquiry. This seems necessary when, as Jerri Daboo notes, “The developers of different approaches to actor training have tended to be directors.”³

The master/apprentice dynamic that Stanislavski creates between Kostya and Tortsov, as well as male dominated lineages of actor training conspire to produce a characteristic male authority in the field but applying a gendered lens to the study of acting pedagogy opens up alternative ways of coming to learn. The neutering of the actor is addressed in the re-orientated title of Rosemary Malague’s study of American actor training, *An Actress Prepares* which interrogates the ways that gender impacts on the learning exchange.⁴ Like Malague, I am interested in how women’s practices might open up different forms of acting pedagogies, and which pay attention to the specificity of the sexed body. In this article I position the theatre director as pedagogue, an educator in a vocational context, to consider the relationship between directing and pedagogy as a gendered practice through the work of the British theatre director Katie Mitchell.

Mitchell, who has been described as “the closest thing Britain has to a genuine auteur” (*The Guardian*, 9th February, 2014), has rigorously defined her process in relation to Stanislavski’s system in her book, *The Director’s Craft*. However, hitherto there has been no detailed examination of her position as pedagogue. Mitchell’s feminism, inherent in the content and form of her work, clearly produces a pedagogy which orientates Stanislavski’s later work towards the politics of the body. In two extended interviews I conducted with Mitchell, as well as interviews with actors who work with her regularly, and rehearsal observations carried out between 2011 and 2014, with a particular focus on her staging of *The Cherry Orchard* (2014),⁵ I have been able to reflect on the nuances of this pedagogy as it has developed.

Post-structural feminist theories and critical pedagogies can offer new perspectives on acting pedagogy. In observing rehearsal room pedagogy I have built on Andrea Milde’s linguistic method for “rehearsal analysis”⁶ to consider:

- How personal and social knowledge is delivered
- How an atmosphere of trust and relationality is built
- How vulnerability is supported

- How authority operates in the room
- How choice and action are scaffolded, or structured for the actor
- How instruction, explanation and feedback are given
- How individual and group progress is managed within time constraints
- How gender operates within the learning

These eight factors recognise that verbal and non-verbal communication operate simultaneously and can be helpful in teasing out some of the complexities of the learning exchange.

“A schooling in acting”

Mitchell’s trajectory into directing and theatre-making was rapid and followed the tradition of Oxbridge-educated male directors. She was President of the Oxford University’s Drama Society and then gained assistant directorships with Paines Plough and the Royal Shakespeare Company. A Churchill fellowship enabled her to study director training in Poland, Lithuania, Georgia and Russia where she saw greater emphasis on the accurate construction of behavior to attend to time, place, intention and obstacle. From 1990-1993 she directed her company, Classics on a Shoestring, and in the decade that followed she was appointed as an Associate Director to the Royal Court, the RSC and the National Theatre. Over the last decade Mitchell has made more work in Germany, Austria and France, countries that champion experimental work. In interview, Mitchell reflects on the ‘otherness’ of her work and suggests that her gender and her feminism may have alienated some UK critics: “I think the cocktail of radicalism, pro-Europeanism, my gender, plus my feminism is a real cocktail and it’s in every inch of the work.”⁷ She reflects on her own learning trajectory in three phases: the craft of acting and Stanislavski; the Golden Age of art history; and the feminist phase, which continues to search for new forms.⁸

The pedagogical impact and value of Mitchell’s work can be seen in her commitment to lifelong learning. In interview she reflects, “I am very interested in finding a way of translating the tools for people who are amateurs, or in education, or starting out in their careers.”⁹ Benedict Cumberbatch states that she offers “a schooling in acting” which feels like “an acting gym” (*The Guardian*, January 14th, 2016). Over time Mitchell has built a community of practice, which enables artists to train and develop work together over extended periods. Females tend to dominate her production teams, which Mitchell describes as a “matriarchy,”¹⁰ acknowledging the influence of Pippa Meyer who has stage-managed over 67 shows with military authority and huge

presence. The long-standing relationships between female collaborators, for example set designer Vicki Mortimer who has repeatedly worked with Mitchell since the 1980s, produces a magnified female authority where trust and directness is central to her analytically demanding process. Younger actors learn from “veterans” and this familial apostology is “a really nice shorthand.”¹¹ Like Cumberbatch, many actors acknowledge that her practice has offered them a training at whatever stage in their career. Actor Esther McAuley describes it as, “the drama school experience that I never had,”¹² and veteran Sandy McDade explains, “Actors who try really hard to put their ego to one side and enjoy the creative discovery get to do things they haven’t done before.”¹³ Mitchell’s commitment to developing pedagogy also extends to directors, who she believes are significantly disadvantaged by the lack of training in the UK. Her guide to directing, *The Director’s Craft*, makes a significant contribution to the pedagogy of directing. At the Young Vic in 2015, Mitchell led a week’s workshop for fifteen female directors, *Women as Artists*, and in 2016 she led the *Women Opera Makers Workshop* in Aix en Provence, demonstrating her particular commitment to supporting women in their careers. In 2017/18 she will teach on the MA in Theatre Directing at Royal Holloway, University of London.

Jonathan Pitches maps the two Russian lineages which have been formative for Mitchell’s practice: a line from Stanislavski to Maria Knebel to Sam Kogan to Ellen Bowman, from which she developed her Active Analysis methodology; and a line from Stanislavski to Boris Zon to Lev Dodin to Tatiana Olear.¹⁴ From Olear, Mitchell learnt how to work with events and intentions.¹⁵ In 2011 she reflected, “We are quite close to Stanislavski, a few generations... I do pure Tatiana and Tatiana does pure Dodin and Dodin does pure Stanislavski, I mean there will be little modifications.”¹⁶ The little modifications that practitioners make reflect their specific contexts, ideologies and the particular challenges posed by each project; their chosen methodologies affect their pedagogical approach. It seems reasonable to ask how Mitchell’s feminism, which is inherent in the content and the form of her work, modifies her approach to Stanislavski’s practice. In what ways does it impact on her pedagogy?

Écriture féminine

Mitchell’s feminist phase has dominated the last decade and she reflects:

“I have a commitment to women’s experience being made a central part of everything...I realised that there was no point hiding it [my feminism], so I decided to really investigate it.”¹⁷ This resultant body of experimental work excavates and exposes a female consciousness in both form and content, even from within problematically ‘male’

and sometimes misogynist texts.¹⁸ Mitchell cites, as formative influences, artists who in various ways foreground the female body and focus on gender politics: Pina Bausch, Liz LeCompte, Jane Campion, Marion Jerez and Francesca Woodman.¹⁹ She works on texts which attend to the marginalised female position: tragedies by Euripides; early twentieth-century European naturalism; adaptations of feminist literature such as Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Feminist theorists and writers such as Simone de Beauvoir, Hélène Cixous, Hannah Arendt and Friederike Mayröcker influence her thinking, their writing sometimes directly appearing in her scripts.²⁰ The work of female writers often provides a commentary, for example Inger Christensen's poetry appeared in *Fräulein Julie* as a counterpoint to Strindberg's original text.²¹

Certain tropes occur repeatedly in Mitchell's work. There is a preoccupation with female suffering, which has earned her the self-imposed title "Queen of Despair."²² The female body is examined as both vulnerable and powerfully enduring, performing its biological condition whilst inflicted with patriarchal violence, as in *Women of Troy* and *Iphigenia at Aulis*.²³ Female suicide is repeatedly shown, as in *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, *The Forbidden Zone*, *Ophelias Zimmer* and *Anatomy of a Suicide*.²⁴ The theme of motherhood occurs repeatedly throughout her work and Mitchell acknowledges, "I have a debt to represent women carefully for my child who is female."²⁵ *Small Hours* investigates postnatal depression,²⁶ *Iphigenia at Aulis* tackles genocide and *Women of Troy* child murder. In *The Cherry Orchard*, Mitchell shifts the focus to Ranevskaya's grief at her son's drowning. Actor Kate Duchêne has repeatedly played 'weeping women' who face death and/or the loss of a child: Clytemestra in *Iphigenia et Aulis*, Hecuba in *Woman of Troy* and Ranevskaya in *The Cherry Orchard*, and in interview she reflects on the habitual vulnerability she performs:

She wants me to go much further in what we know to be real emotions that women experience. And not only about simply suffering, I mean there's a culpability to these women too. Katie wants precision, accurate intellectual analysis and the emotion to go as far as it needs to which is often extreme.²⁷

Duchêne speculates that such raw female emotion may alienate male critics but in the creation of a body of work that foregrounds female suffering Mitchell has created a feminist pedagogy, which enables actresses, often restricted in roles, to flex their muscles in her acting gym.

In its experimentation with form Mitchell's feminist phase can be seen as a type of *écriture féminine* in theatre-making. Hélène Cixous coined the term to describe the

female consciousness in writing.²⁸ In particular Mitchell's venture into a form she describes as 'live cinema' was prompted by the desire to make theatre more aligned to the way she experienced the world. She wanted to allow audiences the subtleties of expressions seen in the rehearsal room, and to reflect how life is experienced moment by moment, in a fragmented and multi-sensed reality. Her adaptation of Virginia Woolf's novel *Waves* at the National in 2006 was seen as radical in its genre-defying approach, and she has continued to refine and develop the complexity of this form over the last decade. Most of these works are adaptations of period novels or short stories, either devised by the company or by a writer, sometimes drawn from feminist literature or re-orientations of male authored works to a female centered perspective. This work invites audiences into the consciousness of both the female protagonist at the center of the drama and concurrently into Mitchell's own consciousness. Mitchell reflects on how Cixous' thinking alerted her to the way that the self is constantly re-invented. She explains:

[T]here's nothing stable in who we are or how we perceive. The idea of capturing that in live performance is interesting. And I suppose trying to question how it is to look out on the world and to perceive it? It's sort of not neat and tidy like a linear narrative, it's much more chaotic.²⁹

As a feminist project Mitchell has developed a style of theatre-making where the lines between film and theatre are blurred to create a third productive medium. In this work, where narrative and character are fractured and in states of becoming, actors face new challenges and Mitchell had adapted her pedagogy accordingly. The experimental form has extended and modified Stanislavskian practice.

Stanislavski's double-consciousness and feminist concepts of doubling

Peter Zazzali defines double consciousness in acting as,

An *individual's* awareness of her emotions, thoughts, sensations, and volition in relationship to an external (or internal) object, which presumably could be either living or inanimate, tangible or intangible that is part of an *experience*—*shared* or otherwise.³⁰

This doubled attention enables what Eve Sedgwick, in her alternative to dualistic thinking, describes as "thinking beside."³¹ Whilst choosing to use the female pronoun, Zazzali's exploration of consciousness through developments in cognitive science omits the specificity of the sexed body as part of a relational experience. The neutering of the

body in discussions around consciousness and science is problematic because it ignores how sex, the biological state, impacts on both inner and outer experiencing. In *An Actor's Work on Himself, Part 11*, Stanislavski identifies the dual consciousness as a necessary condition for "*acting with perspective*."³²

But how does sex affect perspective? In considering Stanislavski's shifting attitudes towards Diderot's seemingly paradoxical double consciousness, Sharon Carnicke notes Mme Clairon's 'double vision' of herself. Clairon "split[s] herself into her own spectator."³³ The idea that the female, by virtue of her sex, is doubled as both subject and object is a repeated thread in post-structural feminist theories and it offers a gendered perspective when thinking about the double consciousness of acting. 'Woman' is not 'other' because she has an 'other' essence, but because the definition produces her as other. In this way a woman's 'being' is an effect of division and concepts of doubling, division and duality become central concerns.

Peggy Phelan points to how, in the scopic relational exchange, women operate from a position of unequal visibility: 'The proposition that one sees oneself in terms of the other and the other in terms of oneself is itself differently marked according to men and women.'³⁴ The objectification of the female body positions women as both discursive object and embodied, historically located subject. In this way woman is culturally and socially conditioned to treat herself as an object to be evaluated and to perform her femininity. Simone de Beauvoir presents the female as doubled, "instead of coinciding exactly with herself, she now begins to exist *outside*."³⁵ Twenty years later John Berger echoed this view: "From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually."³⁶ In Mitchell's work the use of a mirror is a familiar trope: in *Waves*, Liz Kettle gazes at her image in a two-way mirror, whilst another actor speaks her thoughts; in *Ophelias Zimmer*, the absent mirror of the dressing table magnifies its presence. If double vision is seen as a female condition how might this modify female teacher/director's pedagogy with actors?

Reflecting on the 2014 production *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, Rosemary Malague considers Mitchell's realism as feminist intervention, where actors "created a performance hybrid: they spoke in verse, were 'realistic' in their portrayals, and yet their 'authorship' of the characters was visible."³⁷ Analysis of feminist acting pedagogy has tended to locate the visible authoring of character within Brechtian constructions of *gestus*, where attitude and situation are demonstrated through action. Elin Diamond, in her seminal project *Unmaking Mimesis*, points to a Brechtian approach as an antidote to mimesis, where the relation to the real is "productive not referential, geared to change, not to reproducing the same."³⁸ This empowers the actress to move beyond the

experience of 'being looked at' to the perspective of "looking-at being-looked-at-ness" as a way to challenge clichéd representations of femininity.³⁹ Contrary to Diamond's Brechtian proposition Mitchell gains authorship through a Stanislavskian approach. She 'remakes' mimesis through a heightened awareness of the reflexive double consciousness, which teaches actors to be attentive to the performative action of their own bodies. This might be social: for example, when Natalie Klamar played Varya in *The Cherry Orchard*, she discovered how the action of fiddling with her large set of keys communicated her status as house-keeper. This kind of attention can also be behavioural: in an off-text improvisation exploring unrequited love, Klamar discovered that she crossed her arms tightly around her body when faced with confrontation. Attending to what Mitchell refers to as the "data" of behaviour enables authorship, which enables a mimesis geared to change. Geraldine Harris explains that it is possible to alter socially inscribed performative acts that produce gender, as their citational production is by its very nature changeable. Citing Judith Butler, she notes the way that feminist practice must "learn a double movement ... to provisionally institute an identity but at the same time open up this identity category as 'a permanent site of political contest.'" ⁴⁰ Mitchell's performance hybrid modifies Active Analysis to respond to contemporary feminisms, which see the body as both enacted and enacting, inscribed and inscribing. Through teaching the double movement of 'looking-at-being-looked-at-ness' she mines the actor's double consciousness for its political agency. In this way Mitchell produces a feminist pedagogy which, drawing loosely on the Stanislavskian term, can be viewed as a 'method of feminist action'.

Towards a method of feminist action

Feminist pedagogy is a strand of critical pedagogy, attributed to Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire, which aims to empower learners with an alternative to received knowledge and hierarchical learning processes.⁴¹ Its features can be summarised as: recognising that *how* you teach something is as important as *what* you teach; flattening power structures; individualising learning with a commitment to develop political, personal and social awareness; recognising the complexities of problems as opposed to seeking conclusions; taking notions of difference and particularity as productive sites for potential resistance and change. Feminist pedagogy foregrounds the position of women and uses gender as a tool for analysis. Many of these strategies are evident in Mitchell's work with actors.

How might gender affect the pedagogic process? The way that Mitchell exercises authority is subtle and complex. According to Joan Schehkar the feminist director resists

ideas of control as she doesn't want to disempower anyone. Empowerment by its very nature is and must be hierarchical, however Schehkar suggests that the model of production in a feminist directing process "should look less than a pyramid and more like a series of odd sized interceptive spheres, with each person who contributes to the production responsible for her or his special circularity."⁴² Mitchell's formative experiences of Russian director training with its underpinning master-teacher relationships have influenced her agency as pedagogue, where there is no notion of flattened hierarchy within the collaborative process. In fact, she maintains that because of the complexity of theatre-making she is "into clear roles... You don't want to have discussions about job descriptions."⁴³ A close consideration of Mitchell's approach reflects Schehkar's model. Clearly defined roles and a tightly controlled structure allow power to be shared, so that she simultaneously facilitates and leads. Sarah Davey-Hull, a director who trained with Mitchell, reflects: "I'm not there to tell an actor what to do, but to lead an actor."⁴⁴ This idea of 'leading' as opposed to 'telling' or 'controlling' is a more accurate way to consider Mitchell's authority.

In 2015, during the *Women As Artists* workshop, Mitchell reflected that two years of training with Elen Bowman had taught her how to 'lead' as a director.⁴⁵ She stressed the importance of establishing a shared goal with the company and having an agreement about what that means; to find a "lightness of touch"; "a cool, calmer location"; less of "a close up relationship; and more of "a long shot." These terms point to an objective and measured approach, which characterises Mitchell's authority. She recalled an actor who had described her process as "Blow, blow, blow. Push!"⁴⁶ where gentle encouragement could, when necessary, shift to forceful direction. In discussion she explained that she "leads from behind,"⁴⁷ and this repositioning of authority evidences a feminist pedagogy.

Mitchell's leadership operates through the finely tuned structures of her Active Analysis, which she calls "constructions."⁴⁸ The process that Mitchell has honed throughout her career, scaffolds choice for the actor within defined parameters. In 2011, I asked Mitchell to identify which features of Stanislavski's system she found to be most useful. Pointing to his later work, she considered events and intentions and his interest in biology, "which takes you behind psychology,"⁴⁹ to have revolutionised her practice. These two approaches interrogate action choice and bodily data from inside-out and outside-in, and reflecting contemporary feminist thinking, this analysis of action moves beyond Marxist materialism to see the body as both inscribed and inscribing. This opens up the possibility to challenge limiting and oppressive representations, which is central to Mitchell's feminist agenda. Observing rehearsals for *The Cherry Orchard* in 2014, allowed me to analyse these constructions in the context of a feminist pedagogy.

During casting Mitchell is explicit about her process and she tries to mitigate the fear that the actor may be experiencing.⁵⁰ The first read-through works to flatten notions of hierarchy as actors read consecutively as opposed to reading their own parts. Sarah Ridgeway, new to Mitchell's process, reflected how this liberated her from the need to "get it right."⁵¹ The first four weeks of a six-week rehearsal process were structured with group tasks, improvisation and text analysis. In the first week forensic attention was given to constructing a shared picture of time and place. Mitchell presented her timeline from 1850-1904, which mapped the historical and political context. This allowed facts and questions to be identified, researched and shared by the company to build a detailed and comprehensive through-line of action for the events in the play. The list of facts and questions was exhaustive, with as many as 400 to be shared amongst the actors as homework. Setting homework tasks is a pedagogic feature of Mitchell's practice, which enables the company to educate each other so that they become the experts in building a collective understanding of the play world. The ensemble located the Gayev estate accurately in Russia, to map the geography of the estate itself, the building and the layout of the rooms. Physical maps were created and along with images of locations and portraits of secondary characters, this information was pinned around the rehearsal room. These tasks require everyone to know the distances and directions of the lake where Grisha drowned in relation to the cherry orchard, the train distance from Suni to Moscow and the distance from the village when walking or travelling by carriage. Mitchell's original timeline was the starting point for actors to create their own detailed biographies, which were then shared and amended to create a collective history. Through this shared research the company construct a world together so that minute details of time and place, the social domain and habitus, can be accurately played through bodily data. For example, by fixing time and place actors were alerted to the way that the temperature would affect their bodies.

Table work, or 'Round the table analysis,' is a daily practice interspersed with sharing research, or exploring shared pictures through improvisation.⁵² The whole company, including the technical team, work through action choices moment to moment and mark up scripts. There are two forms of action: the action of event, which changes the situation, e.g. a gunman enters the room; and the action of intention, which is played by each individual in response to that event until the next event. The intention is played to affect everyone else on the stage (e.g. I want to keep everyone safe), which ensures action is always relational. Some events can take place in one moment and some last for longer sections of time. For example, actors might identify the first intention to happen on the event and then, in what is termed a "slow burn event," this might change and

become a second intention. In this way the intentions are marked in the script as intention “on the event” and intention “in the event.”⁵³ The counter-action is noted which raises the stakes for the intention. Recalling Rebecca Loukes’ situational en-action theory,⁵⁴ these actions are phenomenological responses to the situation, the environment and the other characters and so are externally (socially) and internally (psychologically) drawn. In this way Marxist notions of inscribed power on the body collide with phenomenological states of being.

Mitchell guides actors to reflexively consider the three-dimensional structure of the play and the character, so that they “play every little muscle of it”⁵⁵ and action responds to a complex network of power structures. This practice enables actors to interrogate characters in their full complexity and, particularly in the case of female characters, challenge clichéd representations. In interview Mitchell explained how they resisted infantilising Anya, as many productions have in the past, dressing her as a woman as opposed to a little girl. Through mining the text they interrogated Anya’s feelings of abandonment by her mother who she hadn’t seen for six years: “We really attend to the detail to construct a character that is by modern day standards, psychologically credible.”⁵⁶ Catrin Stewart, who played Anya, reflected on Mitchell’s direction: “Not to portray women in a certain way. Not being low IQ. Not being a ‘girly’ Anya who is silly and whiny.”⁵⁷ Actors learn their events and intentions before they come to the text and these form the parameters for improvising each section of the play, receiving notes and testing their logic and accuracy in relation to each other. Once tested in practice, the text is brought into the action and in this way they move through the whole text, from analysis to improvisation, working with text, receiving direction, repeating and so forth.

Andrea Milde’s model for rehearsal analysis, or spoken artistic discourse, breaks down modes of dialogic exchange as: providing feedback, providing explanations, using improvisations, providing keys, meaning spontaneous coaching or ‘side coaching’, and framing one’s own activity.⁵⁸ Interestingly, Milde does not include questioning as a specific tool, which seems to be central to Mitchell’s interactions with actors. The constant application of guided questions, in homework tasks building time and place, or in defining intentions foregrounds choice for the actor, who is invested in the multiple construction of ideas. Mitchell’s language operates with pedagogic accuracy and actors value her specificity in feedback. Duchêne notes, “Katie doesn’t like words like ‘good’ or ‘bad’ and that is liberating.”⁵⁹ In her exchanges with actors, her insistence on accuracy and attention to detail is acute, which builds her authority. Using the structures of events, intentions, time and place allows her to maintain consistency and clarity in

feedback. In discussion, certain phrases emerge which might be seen as the 'second order' of rehearsal dialogue. Mitchell cautions actors against playing "affinities," the imaginative leaps an actor might make, which are not drawn from evidence within the text; she avoids choices which she describes as "blurry" or "muddy" and guards against "acting clichés," striving to anticipate "acting corners" and to "land" or "park" an action choice. "Acting corners" refer to difficult moments for the actor where she might find herself without a logical action choice and resorting to a clichéd appropriation. The need to "land" a "clear" action underpins the practice.

The individualised negotiation develops the political, personal and social awareness of the actor within a democratised process. Actor, Sandy McDade, explains the plurality of this learning, which flattens hierarchical divisions:

I think if you accept you're a fish in a shoal or a bird in a flock you are absolutely fine, but you mustn't try to move away from that image... Actors are often cast because they have a certain charisma. Katie doesn't do that. You are there for the group.⁶⁰

The actor finds it harder to retreat into their own "affinities,"⁶¹ because every decision has been decided with everyone else. Some actors find this approach to pinning down decisions too controlling, as Dan Rebellato observes, "It is very demanding; bad theatrical habits are dismantled, approximations and short cuts are exposed."⁶² However, actors often reflect how the structure enables more freedom. Nick Fletcher explained, "I've felt much more suffocated and controlled by other directors, mainly because there's not proper communication between us. But it's a unified understanding and it's the result of a detailed discussion."⁶³

The pedagogic structures that underpin the foundations, architecture and fabric of the work allow the company to progress with clarity and direction without Mitchell's physical presence. During rehearsal Mitchell was ill for a week, and it was interesting to observe how her authority functioned in her absence. The stage management, assistant directors and actors were able to run rehearsals with precision, due to the shared ownership of the ideas structure and the established dialogic practice. Mitchell was able to watch recordings of rehearsal at home and then send notes on each act/section. In her absence her pedagogy was most present, as the company embodied it.

Vital materialism and Active Analysis

Contemporary feminist thinking draws on developments in science and technology to shatter notions of fixity and to recognise bodies as vital, plastic and in states of becoming and Mitchell's practice responds to this. Rosi Braidotti, turning to developments in science, explains: "a new brand of 'materialism' is current in our scientific practices, which reinstates the vital, self-organising capacities of what was previously seen as inert matter."⁶⁴ This 'matter realist feminism' offers a creative alternative to limiting post structuralist linguistics and "fights matter with matter."⁶⁵ As noted earlier, Stanislavski's interest in biology was an early revelation for Mitchell and she maintains a fascination with all physical manifestations including medical conditions. In *The Cherry Orchard* actors worked with the condition of narcolepsy (Pishchik), the autistic spectrum (Gaev), depression (Varya), post-natal depression (Ranevskaya), stroke (Fiers) and agoraphobia (Pishchik's daughter).⁶⁶ These conditions were researched and the minutiae of physical symptoms examined. In this way 'mimesis' necessitates the forensic deconstruction and reconstruction of bodily data.

In *Reconsidering Stanislavski: Feeling, Feminism and The Actor*, Rhonda Blair draws attention to how feminist scientists have questioned cognition, behavior and sexuality and how these might be embodied in the brain.⁶⁷ She cites Antonio Damasio, a neuroscientist who has also influenced Mitchell, to highlight how the self is actualised through en-minded action, which is always relational.⁶⁸ Blair works at the intersections of theory, practice, history, and science and she challenges "feminist actors and acting teachers to be more rigorous in their understanding of bodies, consciousness, and feelings ...with the awareness that these processes are reflective of brain structure and function."⁶⁹ This post-Stanislavskian approach strives to teach acting in a more precise and accurate way, combining phenomenological theory of embodiment with Marxist and post-structuralist considerations of bodies and power. Working in this way the actress recognises how, through detailed analysis, she might author her action within the constructs of realism. For example, in rehearsal for *The Cherry Orchard*, Duchêne, playing Ranevskaya, discovered that her legs literally gave way when she was in a heightened state of emotion. This unbalancing gave physical expression to her grief at the loss of her child to recognise Ranevskaya as a victim of both her social circumstance and her maternal body.

Like Blair, Mitchell has engaged with developments in neuroscience to more accurately understand sexualised brain/body function and how to observe physical data. In 2010 at the National Theatre she invited actors to work with a neuroscientist for *The Emotion Workshop*. They interrogated the phenomenology of action, emotion and cognition and identified seven dominant emotional states to investigate the body/brain

response. Mitchell's actors explored the delay that happens in-between an event and the corresponding emotional reaction. In this moment, unless the actor is clear about what is happening, the action they communicate can be 'muddy' and the audience is not able to read the moment clearly. Mitchell's pedagogy teaches actors how to notice and to accurately recreate the detail of bodily data. For example, in rehearsals for *The Cherry Orchard* actors shared 'slice of life' improvisations on unrequited love. They worked with a partner to re-enact a moment from their life when they had been rejected sexually or romantically. The improvisation was observed "not for judgment" but "as scientists" and Mitchell led the forensic analysis. She was careful in her framing of this exposing exercise, acknowledging, "It's scary isn't it?" and ensuring that the veterans performed first.⁷⁰ This personal sharing, apart from offering a framework for analysis, was bonding for the group. Obviously each individual body experiences and performs emotional states in different ways, but by teaching actors to observe physical data accurately, she develops a reflexive awareness and specificity in her performers. Mitchell's intention is not that the actors *experience* the emotion, but that they learn to accurately *show* it, so that the audience can feel it. In this way her practice references a post-Brechtian approach. She explains this:

Any investigation of emotion as it is etched on the body, is an investigation in order to re-construct the shape so that the audience can feel something — it's not about the actor feeling something, because sometimes when the actor feels something, what we look at is quite opaque.⁷¹

However, this directorial intention is not necessarily what the actor experiences and returning to the paradox of acting, Duchêne, reflecting on her process in *Women of Troy*, admitted that she found it impossible to use Mitchell's process in embodying a theme as cataclysmic as genocide. She said, "It was a bit of a nemesis for me... I'm not very good at pretending to feel things."⁷² What this reveals is that any approach to acting cannot determine *how* an actor experiences the work. Mitchell's 'method of feminist action' offers actors a process but ultimately individuals will experience performance in their own way.

In the "the feminist phase" Mitchell's experimentation with form has modified and re-orientated aspects of her Active Analysis. Live cinema develops acting pedagogy to explore technology as an extension of the body. Duchêne reflects, "I love the multi-media stuff because I am interested in different ways of acting...I like the feeling of construction around it in a different more technical way."⁷³ By the time of *...some trace of her* at the National in 2008, a company devised adaptation of Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*,

the fragmented narrative moved out from behind the tables used in *Waves*, to be more fluid and physical. The actors appeared to dance around the stage as camera cables weaved in and out of each other, one minute acting in character within a shot, the next creating the Foley sound, narrating the text or setting up and filming the image. In this work the actors were doubled to create a second role as camera operators, constantly switching between worlds, the real temporal world of filming and the constructed temporality of the fragmentary narrative, Mitchell describes this as “a very subtle level of performance.”⁷⁴ Notions of doubleness or beside-ness are inherent in the production of the work, which is itself its own process.

In this post-dramatic work Mitchell applies the well-tested Stanislavskian constructions of her more traditional practice. In rehearsal for *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, a live cinema work that premiered in Vienna in 2014, the actors worked with facts and questions, time and place, back history, biographies, events and intentions. The same detailed discussion, questioning and negotiated fixing of action was evident, but it was applied to the small fragmented bits of action that formed the text. Additionally, the actors learnt to operate cameras and set up shots, moving with a synchronized choreography. The camera becomes an extension of the body, and reminiscent of Donna Haraway’s cyborg feminism, this agitates for a new political ontology that rethinks the unity of the human being.⁷⁵ Bodies are liminal, shifting states of possibility where being is presented as division, resisting the limiting structures that oppress women in particular. In Louise Le Page’s analysis of *Waves*, Le Page observes how identity is not defined by psychological type but “according to what the body *does*, not what it *is*.”⁷⁶ By separating character and human elements — body, voice, sound — “a *schizo* subject”⁷⁷ emerges that resists phallogentric notions of truth and fixed identity. When the camera is in the hands of an actress, costumed in restrictive period clothing, setting up her own shot or setting up the shot and filming an other, the female gaze and women’s shifting historical agency is foregrounded. The audience simultaneously watch the live action and the screen action to share the space of seeing and being seen with the actor.⁷⁸ Paradoxically, in the space between ‘watching’ an image or a sound being constructed and ‘seeing’ the effect, room is made for mis-seeing and mis-hearing. When our senses are disorientated we must work harder to re-construct the deconstructed elements. Through this investment we are drawn physiologically into the action, which produces a more intense realism

Mitchell’s early phase, “Stanislavski and the craft of the actor”⁷⁹ honed constructions in order to immerse the actor in a heightened realism. Her feminist phase has modified Active Analysis, refining the actor’s understanding of their double

consciousness to empower her to author her work. In her investigation of form she has developed a post-Stanislavskian approach, re-orientated towards immersing the audience, where consciousness is a state of becoming. This maneuver seems necessary when, as Rosi Braidotti provokes, “the only constant in the third millennium is change, then the challenge lies in how to think about processes rather than concepts.”⁸⁰ This body of work foregrounds the female condition and enables women as artists. In her lifetime commitment to ‘schooling’ actors and directors Mitchell, feminist director and pedagogue, offers a vital alternative to male dominated training practices.

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1. Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, 329.
 2. By ‘pedagogy’ I mean the change in consciousness between the teacher, the learner and the knowledge that they produce together.
 3. Zarrilli et al., *Psychophysical Phenomenon*, 41.
 4. Malague, *An Actress Prepares*
 5. Observation of *The Cherry Orchard*, Young Vic, (25.08.14 – 19.09.14).
 6. Milde, “Spoken Language.”
 7. Interview with Mitchell, Young Vic, (10.10.14).
 8. Observation of *Women as Artists*, Young Vic, (02.03.15 – 06.03.15).
 9. Interview with Mitchell, National Theatre, (09.10.11).
 10. Mitchell, Young Vic, (10.10.14).
 11. Interview with Stewart, Young Vic, (23.09.14).
 12. Interview with McAuley, National Theatre, (14.05.12).
 13. Interview with McDade, Hampstead Theatre, (17.01.11).
 14. Pitches, *Russians in Britain*, 203.
 15. Mitchell, *Director's Craft*, 230.
 16. Mitchell, (09.10.11).
 17. Mitchell, (10.10.14).
 18. Ibid.
 19. Shevstova, “On Directing,” 17.
 20. Mitchell, (10.10.14).
 21. *Fraülein Julie*, Schaubühne Berlin, (2013).
 22. Interview with Duchêne, Young Vic, (07.10.14).
 23. *Iphigenia at Aulis* (2004) and *Women of Troy* (2007), National Theatre.
 24. *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, Kasino Theatre, Vienna (2014), *The Forbidden Zone*, Barbican, (2016), *Ophelias Zimmer*, *Anatomy of a Suicide*, Royal Court (2016, 2017).
 25. Mitchell, (10.10.14).
 26. *Small Hours*, Hampstead Theatre, (2011).
 27. Duchêne, (07.10.14).
 28. Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa.”
 29. Mitchell, (10.10.14).
 30. Zazzali & Заззали, “Actor's Double- Consciousness,” 48.
 31. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 8.
 32. Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, 260.

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33. Carnicke, *Stanislavski in Focus*, 142.
 34. Phelan, *Unmarked*, 17.
 35. Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 373.
 36. Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 46.
 37. Malague, "Theatrical Realism as Feminist Intervention,"(2013).
 38. Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*, xiv.
 39. Ibid.
 40. Harris, *Staging Femininities*, 72.
 41. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.
 42. Donkin and Clement, *Upstaging Big Daddy*, 256.
 43. Mitchell, (10.10.14).
 44. Interview with Davey-Hull, RCSSD, (17.11.11).
 45. Elen and Robert Bowman set up Living Pictures in 1995 to provide training for directors.
 46. Mitchell, (02.03.15 – 06.03.15).
 47. Mitchell, (10.10.14).
 48. Ibid.
 49. Mitchell, (09.10.11).
 50. Mitchell, (02.03.15 – 06.03.15).
 51. Interview with Ridgeway, Young Vic, (23.09.14).
 52. Merlin, *Konstantin Stanislavsky*, 15.
 53. Mitchell, *Director's Craft*, 64.
 54. Zarrilli et al., *Acting: Psychophysical Phenomenon*, 46-63.
 55. Shevstova, "On Directing," 17.
 56. Mitchell, (10.10.14).
 57. Stewart, (23.09.14).
 58. Milde, "Spoken Language,"(2012).
 59. Duchêne, (14.05.12).
 60. McDade, (17.01.11).
 61. Mitchell, *Director's Craft*, 59.
 62. Delgado and Rebellato, *Contemporary European Directors*, 317.
 63. Fletcher and McAuley, (14.05.12).
 64. Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory*, 16.
 65. Ibid.
 66. Observation of *The Cherry Orchard*, (25.08.14 – 19.09.14).
 67. Blair, "Reconsidering Stanislavski," 117.
 68. Ibid, 185-188.
 69. Ibid, 189.
 70. *The Cherry Orchard*, (25.08.14 – 19.09.14).
 71. Mitchell, (09.10.11).
 72. Ibid.
 73. Duchêne, (07.10.14).
 74. Rebellato and Mitchell, (04.05.14).
 75. Haraway, *Cyborgs and Women*, 128.
 76. Le Page, "Posthuman Perspectives," 144.
 77. Ibid.
 78. Phelan, *Unmarked*, 17.

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79. Mitchell, (10.10.14).
81. Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory*, 15.

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